

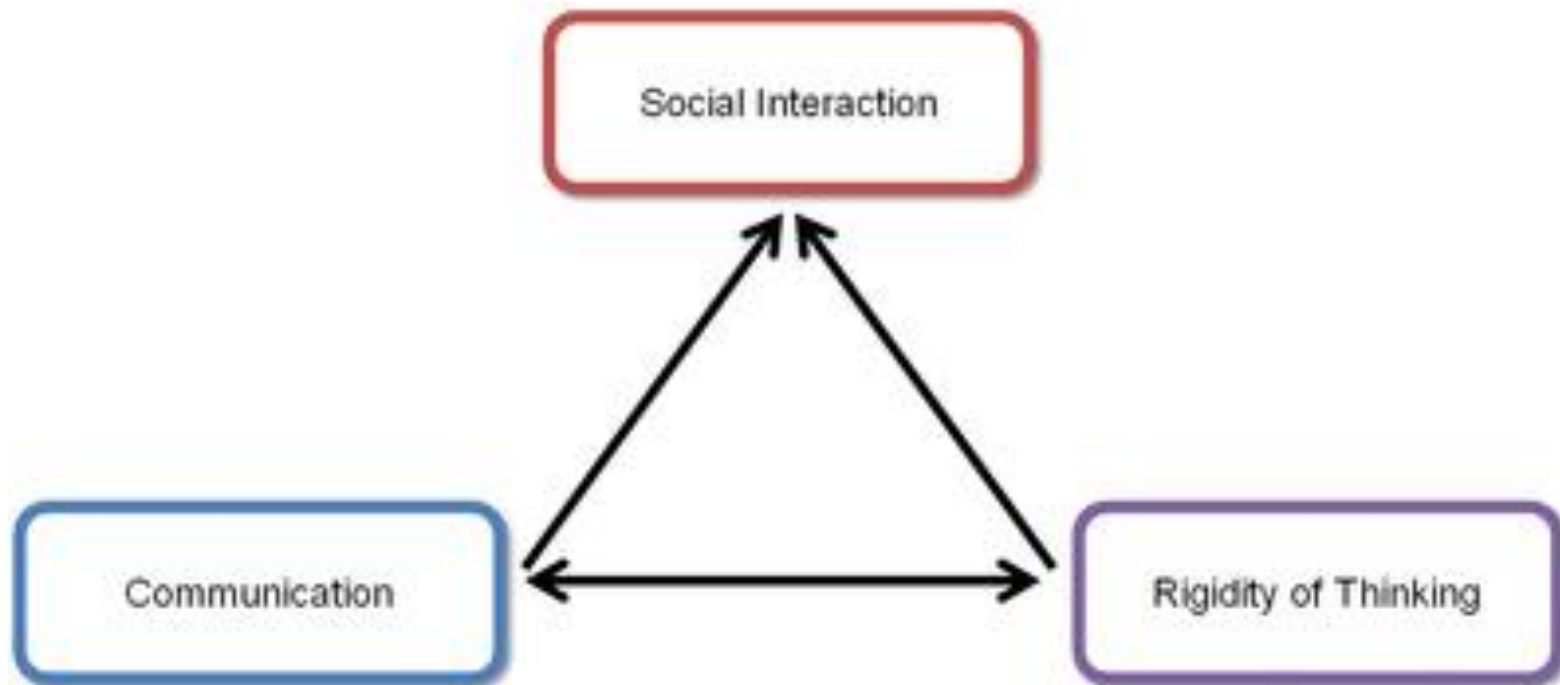
IS FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATED WITH HAPPINESS IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM?

Mangan, L., & Swords, L. (2011)

Growing Up in Ireland Conference
Dublin, 2011

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

- Characterised by a triad of deficits
 - social, emotional & communicative impairments (Grigorenko, 2009)



ASD & FRIENDSHIP

- Little is known about the nature of friendship in children with ASD (Bauminger et al., 2008).
- Social interaction is not the main goal for children with ASD during ‘free play’ (McConnell, 2002).
- Kanner (1943, p. 249)
 - “a powerful desire for aloneness”



ASD & LONELINESS

- Children with ASD experience increased loneliness vs typically-developing counterparts (Lasgaard, et al., 2010).
- Findings not always replicated –
 - Chamberlain et al. (2007) found no significant difference despite children with ASD having fewer reciprocal friendships.
 - Concluded:
 - ❖ Obtain sufficient emotional support from a smaller number of less reciprocal friendships
 - ❖ OR alternatively, an “ignorant bliss”



HOWEVER.....

- The experience of loneliness by children with ASD is evidence in itself that they do have an interest in social interaction (Lasgaard et al., 2010)



- Holder & Coleman (2009)
 - Investigated happiness and social relationships amongst typically developing children
 - Happiness & Popularity Subscales of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale
 - Popularity significantly associated with happiness

RESEARCH QUESTION

- Is friendship associated with happiness in children with ASD?



METHODOLOGY

○ Phase 1: GUI 9-year cohort sub-analyses

- ASD sample ($n = 39$)
- Piers- Harris Self-Concept Scale (Piers et al., 2002)
 - Popularity (e.g. 'My classmates make fun of me' and 'I am popular with boys/girls')
 - Happiness and Satisfaction (e.g. 'I am a happy person' and 'I am cheerful')
- Results used as a springboard for research

○ Part 2: Semi-structured interviews

- ASD children ($n = 10$)
 - 15-20 minutes in own school, during normal school hours.
- 

RESULTS

○ Phase 1: GUI 9-year cohort sub-analyses

- Happiness positively associated with Popularity for both children with ASD and typically-developing children

Piers-Harris subscale:	Mean HAP scores (\pm SD)	Mean POP scores (\pm SD)	r/r_s
ASD	8.38 (\pm 1.60)	7.03 (\pm 2.37)	0.54**
Comparison	8.78 (\pm 1.58)	8.74 (\pm 2.36)	0.45**

** $p < 0.001$



RESULTS CONT.

- No difference between children with ASD and typically-developing children's reported Happiness...despite significantly lower Popularity scores for ASD children.

Piers-Harris subscale:	ASD	Comparison	Z
Mean HAP scores (\pm SD)	8.38 (\pm 1.60)	8.78 (\pm 1.58)	-1.88 <i>ns</i>
Mean POP scores (\pm SD)	7.03 (\pm 2.37)	8.74 (\pm 2.36)	-4.57**

** $p < 0.001$, *ns* = non-significant



RESULTS – Demographic Info

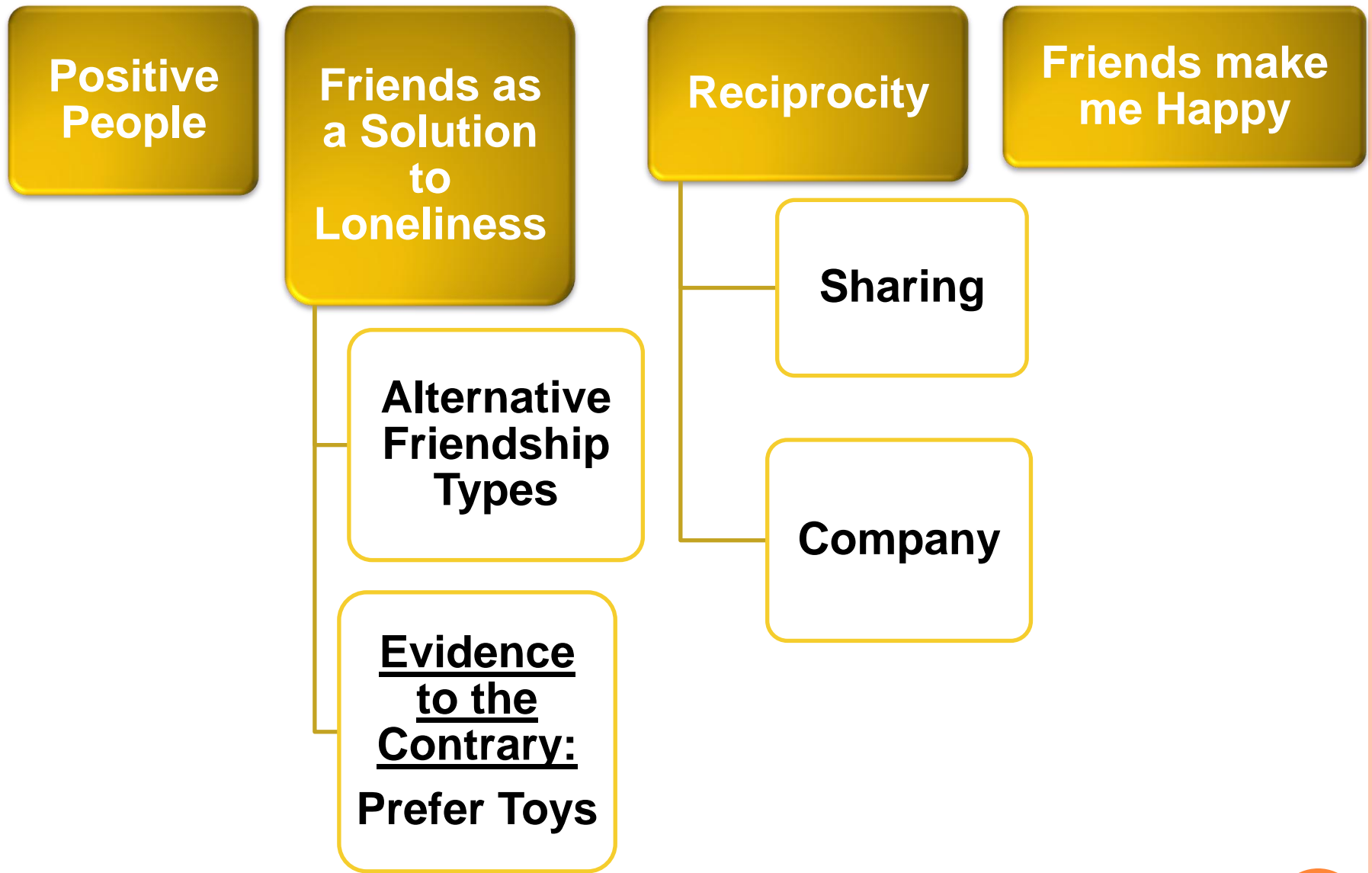
○ Part 2: Semi-structured interviewees

ASD Interviewees (<i>n</i> = 10)	
Male/ female	10/ 0
Mean Age in years (\pm SD)	9.40 (\pm 1.58)
Age Range	7 – 13 years
Attending Mainstream School/ Autistic Unit	8/2
<u>SDQ subscale mean scores (\pmSD):</u>	
-Emotional Symptoms	4.74 (\pm 2.67)
- Conduct Problems	1.90 (\pm 2.08)
- Hyperactivity	4.80 (\pm 3.15)
- Peer Problems	3.00 (\pm 2.05)
- Prosocial	7.90 (\pm 2.08)

RESULTS CONT.

- Thematic Analysis
 - A method of qualitative data analysis used to identify, analyse and report themes or patterns within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
 - Particularly useful for exploratory research
- 4 over-arching themes identified:
 1. 'Friends as Positive People'
 2. 'Friends as a Solution to Loneliness'
 3. 'Reciprocity'
 4. 'Friends Make me Happy'





- Figure 1: Thematic Map of themes, accompanying subthemes and evidence to the contrary.




THEME 1:

FRIENDS AS POSITIVE PEOPLE

- A friend was a person who had very positive characteristics: *“kind”, “helpful”, “nice”*.
 - Expected not to violate such a positive characteristics: *“never bullies”, does “not take stuff off you”, “don’t hit or punch you”*.
 - *“...when there’s something wrong like somebody bullying you...He can ask what’s wrong and then he can tell...”*

Child 9 (9 years)

 - *“A friend is someone who cares about you.”*

Child 4 (9 years)
- 


THEME 2: RECIPROACITY

- The importance of reciprocity within a friendship was emphasised.
- Reciprocity was described in different forms and included sharing interests and possessions, and keeping each other company.
- *“...a friend is someone who, ya...play what they like and whatever you like as well.”*

Child 7 (9 years)



THEME 3: FRIENDS AS A SOLUTION TO LONELINESS

- Highly recurrent theme within the data.
 - Reason for having or wanting friendships were to avoid loneliness and the resulting feeling of sadness.
 - *Interviewer: “And why do you like having friends?”*
“Cos you won’t be lonely.”
Child 1 (10 years)
 - *“...it’s fun to have friends and not be lonely... ‘cos I’d feel bored and sad...”*
Child 7 (9 years)
- 

THEME 4:

FRIENDS MAKE ME HAPPY

- Majority stated that friends made them *“happy”* because they offered companionship, shared their interests and possessions
 - Friends are *“fun”*, *“have cool toys”*, *“play with me”*, *“because they like the thing that I like”*, *“cheer me up”*
 - Interviewer: *“And how do your friends make you feel...?”*
 - *“Happy-y, happy, happy-y.”* Child 4 (9 years)
 - *“...They make me happy...”* Child 8 (9 years)
 - *“Really happy”* Child 7 (9 years)



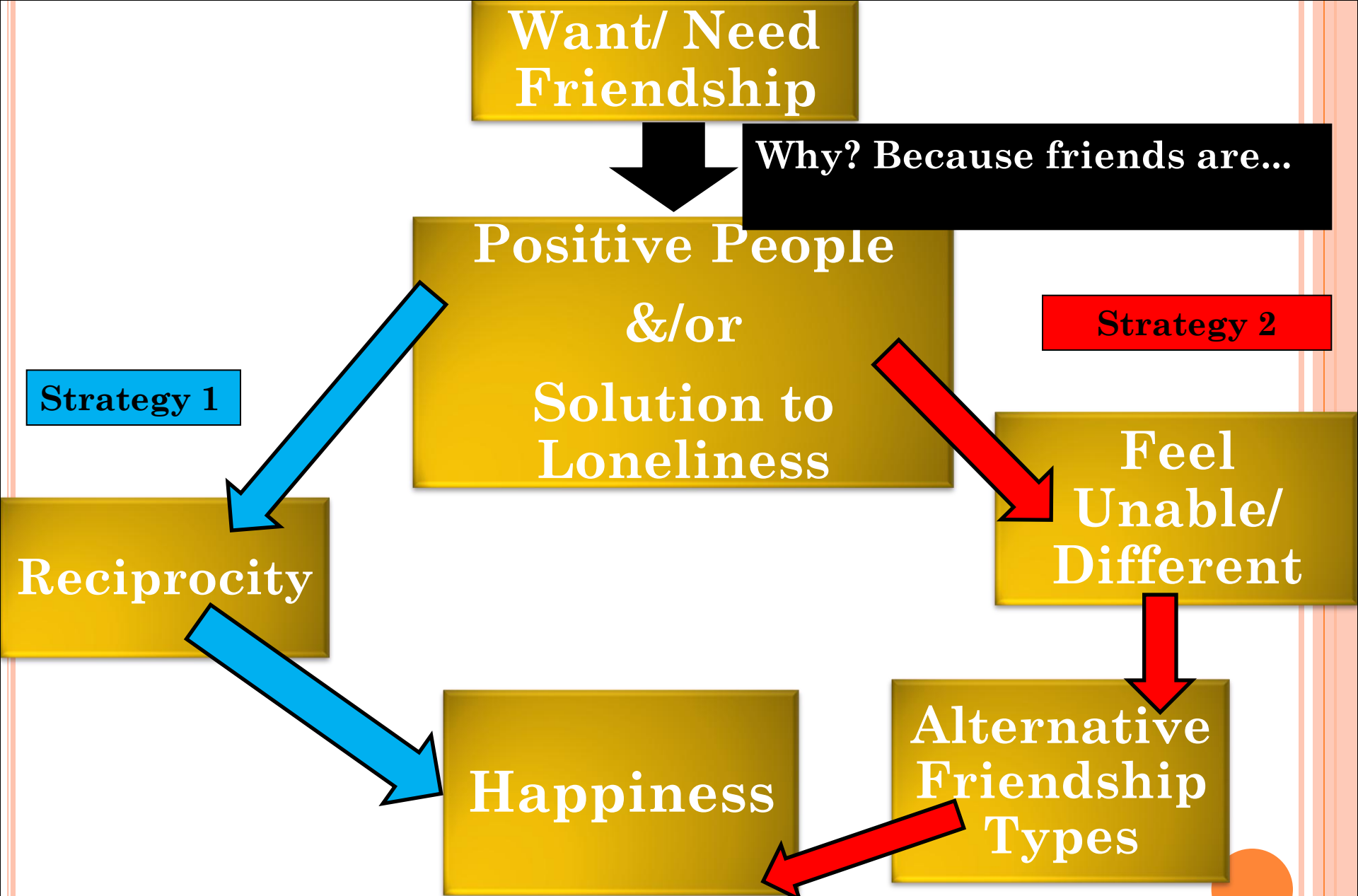


Figure 2: Potential Pathways to Happiness via Friendship for ASD Children

Limitations and Future Research

- Exploratory research
- Difficulties in interviewing some children
 - More severely autistic children excluded ($n=3$)
 - Can findings can be generalised?
- Degree happiness associated with different friend types? (i.e. Mother vs peer)



CONCLUSIONS

- Children with ASD children appeared to value friendship a great deal.
- Wanted/Needed friends because they were perceived to be positive people and/or because they viewed friends to be a solution to loneliness.



CONCLUSIONS


- They tended to use two different strategies to gain friends, the product of which was associated happiness.
- Strategy 1 involved having a reciprocal friendship (Reciprocity Theme) in which the ASD children and their friends; shared interests and possessions, and kept each other company (subthemes of Reciprocity).

- *“...he likes the stuff that I like and we always play out with each other and em, we invite each other to each other’s houses.”*
 - *Child 7 (9 years)*
- *“...I would just give whatever they need to them.”*
 - *Child 7 (9 years)*



- They reported that these reciprocal relationships with their friends ultimately resulted in their reported happiness.
 - *“They would eh, do things that make ya happy...like play their games and...sharin”*
– Child 3 (8 years)




- Strategy 2 involved the children reporting that they wanted friends however; they felt unable/different → barrier to gaining friends.
- Therefore, they emphasised 'Alternative Friendship Types' (e.g. parents, siblings) which when questioned they stated that these particular friendships did indeed make them happy. 

○ *“....well I would like to play with them but I don't have the same strength...” – Child 8 (9 years)*

○ *“...what makes XXXX my friend um, one time he helped me...” –
Child 8 (9 years)
(Alternative Friendship Types)*



- Regardless of the friendship type these friendships ultimately resulted in happiness.
 - *Interviewer: What do you think a friend is?*
 - ***“A cousin... Sometimes they make ya happy...”*** – Child 3 (8 years)
 - ***“Happy-y, happy, happy-y”*** – Child 4 (9 years)
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Thank You

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